

Thinking about Brakhage, 1
Chuck Kleinhans

The late Stan Brakhage was the preeminent American experimental film artist in the second half of the 20th century. From his initial fame in the early Sixties as a young genius of the avant garde and a leading polemicist establishing independent film among the recognized arts, he moved to a position of seniority and recognition, if not universal acclaim. The American Federation of Arts bestowed official acknowledgement of Brakhage as a film artist by giving him the first one-person retrospective in their prestigious series of packaged film programs aimed at the museum audience. His major writing since *Metaphors on Vision*, 1963, appeared in a hefty anthology, *Brakhage Scrapbook*, and his prolific film output continued to inspire programmers and critics. His occasional one-person shows in major venues were always important events in the experimental film calendar. And after years of making a living for himself and his family by lecturing and teaching as a commuter, he attained a regular position in his Rocky Mountain home area at the University of Colorado. His late cancer and death brought new attention to his career and commemoration in the form of a two disk DVD of representative major work.

Stan Brakhage did more than any other filmmaker in history to explore the expressive potential of silent, color, non-dramatic film. He did this by pushing the concept of film as self-expression and self-exploration to its limits. The camera eye is the creative I. The unique moment of perception, the phenomenology of the perceptual field, and its connection with and mediation of personal and public life, the individual and the social extensions of perception, cognition, and memory, are all explored by Brakhage. In this he belongs among the great pioneers of visual and cinematic knowledge, and his place in the film medium's aesthetic history is secure. Brakhage achieved this position by severely limiting the medium's usual communicative function and by pursuing the ethos of the individual Romantic artist struggling to obtain an inner vision in a degraded historical world. Thus Brakhage rightly belongs at the center of P. Adam Sitney's authoritative consideration of U.S. experimental cinema, *Visionary Film*, for in both example and achievement, Brakhage stands as the great master of avant garde film in the U.S.

But for those who reject visionary Romanticism as a sufficient or desirable artistic mode, Brakhage remains the supreme example of an idealist artist alienated from social and political reality, a patriarch whose present prestige (there is precious little power to be traded in the film avant garde) stands in the way of newer experimental developments. What Brakhage represents is the achievement of a certain phase of the New American Cinema at a time when the hegemony of the visionary style is being challenged. If for no other reason than his prestige, historical place, and prolific production, Brakhage remains the starting point for any encompassing assessment of U.S. experimental film today. Even

those who want to dismiss him, as Jonathan Rosenbaum did in his book, *Film: The Front Line* 1983, find that they cannot ignore him. But how we can understand and assess his work remains a problem to be worked out, especially if we find his own statements and those of his admiring commentators questionable. This is especially so if we find the (usually) uninformed dismissal of Brakhage equally questionable. We need to get beyond the legend to see the film work anew--to find a radical aesthetic sufficient for the films.

The Legend

I once met Stan the man, but before that I knew very well Stan the legend from the films, the writings, the criticism, and of course from that staple of art world communication, the gossip. In terms of understanding his art, the legend is essential, for Brakhage created and perpetuated his own mythology (a necessary and inevitable act--the film artworld form of "branding") and made it central to his own film work. This is distinctly disturbing within a formalist critical climate because formalism begins with rejecting the artist's biography, with discarding as irrelevant any statement or notion of intention. The text is supposed to stand alone and reveal itself by its own exquisite logic, by close study of its formal qualities and arrangements. For example, we never need to know if the loft depicted in *Wavelength* is Michael Snow's or someone else's, or if the people who appear in the film are friends, family, or paid actors. It doesn't matter if Snow took the photo on the far wall or not. But it matters very much that we know in the *Sincerity* films that this is the Brakhage family and that this is their log cabin in Colorado. Similarly, Hollis Frampton's structuralist film *Zorn's Lemma* can be adequately (if not fully) dissected and understood without any knowledge of or reference to Frampton's personal life. But we can't fully comprehend *Window Water Baby Moving* without knowing that the woman depicted is Jane Brakhage, the filmmaker's wife, and that the man's face we see at the end is Stan filmed by her. And in fact knowing even more than that was thought important by both of them. Thus Jane Brakhage writes an essay for *Film Culture*, "The Birth Film," about the experience; and the long interview with Stan introducing his major essay, *Metaphors on Vision*, contains an extended discussion of the film's making.

We can understand many of Brakhage's films only through the biography and the critical-theoretical apparatus he's put forth--either directly as in his writings, interviews, and public statements, or indirectly through the privileged knowledge of his critics. For example, Marjorie Keller's close reading of *Murder Psalm* depends on her extra-textual knowledge gained as one of Brakhage's students, as she herself notes. For those outside the legend, they may experience many Brakhage films as baffling at best and frequently they reject the work and its maker.

Rejection of a (sometimes) more informed variety marks many left and feminist reactions to Brakhage. Jonathan Rosenbaum polemically attacks Brakhage's work and legend.

I am still waiting...for a critique of Brakhage that begins to deal critically with the familial, patriarchal, and phallocratic side of his work and the reactionary political stance that inevitably derives from it.

And he expands the charge with a critique of

a sort of metaphysical conceit underlying the whole American avant-garde romantic tradition--a central aspect of the work of Brakhage, Noren, Benning, Jost, Robert Nelson, and countless others, which reduces the universe to a list of male possessions: This is my wife, my child, my gun, my camera, my house, my car, my summer vacation, my life. And while the possessiveness of Mekas (and accompanying self-aggrandizement) has relatively little of the offensiveness--and much less of the formal complexity--of Brakhage, it still rests on an unproblematic embrace of The Essential Verities that are somehow taken to be outside all history and ideology, an assumption of innocence that cannot help but give off a certain whiff of complacency even while it makes a certain form of simplicity and poetic insight possible.

There are several important matters here for Rosenbaum's argument is substantial though terse.

Understanding Brakhage depends on thinking about the present possibilities of Romantic aesthetics and practices and their political significance. In brief, my argument assumes that Romanticism is inherent to the modern, capitalist era. It will not be decisively superseded as a set of artistic options and concerns until capitalism itself is superseded. The dominant rising artistic trend at the end of the 18th Century and beginning of the 19th Century as Europe was moving from feudalism to industrial capitalism, Romanticism remains a wellspring of creativity afterwards and always present as an option, although art changes and transmutes through different movements and strategies over time. Subsequent artistic reactions to the strictly defined Romantic movement never really overcome the basic ideological structures and stances of romanticism. Even those twentieth century film artists who seem to reject most decisively the baggage of Romanticism and its later transformation into realism, such as (in Rosenbaum's pantheon) Chantal Akerman, Peter Gidal, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet (to take only the most self and critically proclaimed anti-romantic and anti-realist figures that this critic praises) turn out to be refractory cases still fitting the overall paradigm.

Born in the end of the 18th century, Romanticism fully flowers in the 19th, and works out its various possibilities, including those specific

sub-movements that claim to be anti-romantic. For all intents and purposes, the 20th century displays the extension, expansion, and repetition of those forms and norms. Because of this, the basic premise of Sitney's *Visionary Film* can make so much sense: the American film avant garde from 1943 to 1978 (in the second edition) repeats and encapsulates the internal developmental pattern of romantic poetry (particularly British poetry, following Sitney's mentor critic, Harold Bloom). Ontogeny repeats phylogeny. Romanticism, the art paradigm of the capitalist era, arising in reaction to previous art traditions, changed the meaning of art and its role in society as well as the role of the artist. It stressed the unique individual and his/her achievements. By promoting singularity and individualism, making the person the measure rather than his or her family, lineage, or property, individual creativity and originality were stressed over adherence to tradition, accepted rules or imitation of past masters in art. Because it valued individual consciousness and subjectivity, it privileged the private part of perception, cognition, and memory. Dream and fantasy and eventually the unconscious were recognized as valid personal experiences and artistic materials. From the ecstatic disorientation of unfulfilled love in Goethe's young Werther to the intoxicated reveries of Dequincy's opium eater, forms of altered perception and heightened experience were validated: physical and religious ecstasy, love, drugs, art, fevered illness. Against the regularity and uniformity of neo-classicism, the fragmented, incomplete, mixed, and grotesque were celebrated. Against the assumption that the general social order is the primary place of self-understanding, the Romantics from Wordsworth to Thoreau found nature the site of self-examination.

Validating the personal produced a new recognition by male artists of the domestic sphere as the center of personal life and thereby part of art. Additionally, previously ignored segments of the population were included in the acceptable subject matter for art. In addition to rulers, aristocrats, military figures and merchants, ordinary people--workers and peasants--were depicted, though often by strongly sentimentalizing their poverty and harsh physical labor and conditions. For the first time childhood was recognized as a special state of life, free from some of the imposed restraints of social rules for adults. The allure of exoticism was added to national and racial difference and non-Western people were seen as interesting, child-like primitives.

In ideological terms the effect of this validation of the personal and the expression of private experience was the place individuals outside of power, apart from the public sphere, for their self-definition. The personal was the starting point for the political. The democratic state, it was claimed, existed to promote the pursuit of happiness. While romanticism contained a strong attack on rationalism and organized religion, it also held to a new mystical moral-aesthetic sensibility. Some of this produced a nostalgia for the past that could be paired with a sense of the future as void. Romanticism could be oriented to an eventual return to religion through a mystical view of nature, belief in the supernatural, or the

practice of ritualized devotion. In this context Brakhage can be seen as a quintessentially romantic artist. His various writings could serve as a handbook of romantic dogma:

Imagine an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green?" How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can they eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible gradations of color. Imagine a world before the "beginning was the word."--
Metaphors on vision.

My first instruction, then: if you happen to have a light meter--give it away....--A Motion Picture Giving and Taking Book.